

Big Mac attacker

Fond Du Lac man extends double-burger world mark to 18,000

By Lee Reinsch, *The Reporter* (Wisconsin), Nov. 7, 2001

How many of us can say we were a question on the "Hollywood Squares"? Or a guest on "Oprah"? Or a recordholder in the Guinness Book of World Records? Or had a math curriculum developed around us?

Guinness Book of World Records holder Don Gorske enjoys life's simple pleasures. Give him a sandwich and a soda, and he's happy as a sesame seed on a bun.

But it can't be just any old sandwich. It's got to be two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles and onions on a sesame seed bun.

After downing his 18,000th Big Mac on Tuesday, Gorske says he still loves his favorite feast.

"It's very tasty to me, and it's very tasty every day," Gorske said to an audience of about 100 students and faculty gathered Tuesday morning at Fond du Lac High School to help Gorske celebrate. "It's the perfect sandwich."

Gorske's fetish started in the spring of 1972, when he got his first car. Then 18, he drove his new wheels straight to McDonald's. He made three trips that day, each time ordering three Big Macs and tossing the cartons into the back seat.

He kept up his nine-Big-Mac-a-day diet for a month, until he finally cleaned out his car to make room for a passenger. That's when he counted the cartons and discovered he'd eaten 265 Big Macs in a month. He still wasn't sick of them, so he kept on ordering them. He didn't think he'd still be eating them 29 years later.

"The Vietnam War was going on, and I figured I would keep counting Big Macs until I got drafted," Gorske said. "So I kept counting. I never got drafted."

Back then, Big Macs sold for 49 cents. Now, they're about \$2.

Fond du Lac High School math teacher Tom Strauss met Gorske in 1987. The numerically-minded Strauss clicked immediately with the count-happy Gorske.

Strauss wrote a problem-solving curriculum around Gorske's habit. Since then, his students have dissected Gorske's diet and calculated how many individual ingredients he has eaten.

That was 14½ years, 10,000 Big Macs and 1,500 Fond du Lac students ago. Now, one in six Wisconsin public schools uses Strauss' math lab, as do those in 25 states. They've figured that, to date, Gorske has gone through:

800 heads of lettuce. 820 onions. 1,900 whole pickles. 563 pounds of cheese. 100 gallons of special sauce. 14.5 cows. 6.25 million sesame seeds.

Gorske has tapered off over the years. Instead of nine Big Macs, he usually eats two per day. In 2000, he marked his 20th consecutive year of eating 700 or more Big Macs. His daily diet consists of two Big Macs, french fries and a Coke. He doesn't eat breakfast or supper.

Gorske's main way to unwind after work is to sit down at home with *The Reporter* and his McDonald's sack.

It's hard to believe for those who haven't seen him in person, but Gorske remains svelte (175 pounds at over 6 feet tall). And fit. Gorske carries copies of his blood cholesterol test stating that his cholesterol is a low 156. He says that while he gets a cold now and then, he doesn't get sick often — and never so sick that he couldn't eat a Big Mac.

A Big Mac has 590 calories, said Todd Vahlsing, director of information services for corporate McDonald's Fox Valley regional level in Neenah.

Gorske eats little else. Sometimes, he'll order a different kind of sandwich along with his daily Big Mac fix, but nothing else trips his trigger quite as much. In April of this year, he had prime rib for the first time in 17 years.

"It was OK, but give me a Big Mac any day," he said.

"We call him 'The Big Mac Guy,' or sometimes 'Mac Man,' " said Joleen Schibline, manager of the Military Road McDonald's, the store he has adopted as his own personal kitchen. "We love him."

Since 1980, he's missed only eight Big Mac days. Each time, he had a good reason - a family death, work emergency or McDonald's that closed early for cleaning.

"I've been keeping one or two in the freezer now, in case there's a snowstorm and I can't get to a McDonald's," he said.

The Guinness Book of World Records rejected Gorske for 20 years because its editors feared it might promote gluttony, he said. But after former McDonald's manager Chris Denslow wrote to Guinness and verified Gorske as a regular customer, he got a call from London. This year's edition carries his name along with the tally of 17,500 Big Macs.

"I guess attitudes have changed," he said.

Gorske has turned down invitations from Jay Leno to appear on his show because he didn't want to miss work. Conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh bashed Gorske on the air for wasting his money on junkfood, he said, adding that he didn't mind the criticism.

"Hollywood Squares" contestants Donny and Marie Osmond answered incorrectly when asked what food Fond du Lac, Wisconsin resident Don Gorske had eaten thousands of.

"They said souffles or something," Gorske said.

Although he may sound like a spokesperson for McDonald's, he's not. He's a prison guard, husband and father of two. He pays full price for his McDonald's meals.

Gorske hasn't been in any commercials, but a Florida McDonald's manager once flew him down for the grand opening of a new franchise.

"I said, (to the Florida manager), 'Are you sure you want me? I'm just an ordinary guy. All I do is eat Big Macs,'" Gorske said.

The manager insisted and said he'd always wanted to meet him.

Vahlsing said Gorske has been "up for consideration" for a commercial.

"The timing never has really worked out," Vahlsing said. "If something works out in the future, it may happen."

Gorske's love of McDonald's extends to its non-perishable items. His attic and basement serve as a tangible retrospective of McDonald's memorabilia throughout the decades: placemats, game pieces, Ronald McDonald sunglasses, Happy Meal toys, calendars. He even saves cups and Big Mac cartons for posterity's sake.

One of his great disappointments in life happened when his father threw out his collection of bright red early Big Mac cartons.

Over time, McDonald's has changed its packaging and patty size (the burgers are much smaller now, he says), but its recipe hasn't varied. He once taste-tested a "fake" Big Mac on the "Oprah" television show and knew immediately the special sauce was off.

"The chef used Thousand Island, and I could tell right away," Gorske said.

Gorske proposed to his wife Mary in a parking stall at McDonald's on Military Road more than 25 years ago. She cooked for a month before he politely asked her if she would mind never cooking again.

Mary said she thought at first he'd get sick of Big Macs.

"I figured he'd give up," she said. "I thought he was more normal."

But she said she would never try to make him stop.